

Far behind the Benoit house, invisible from the road, is a slab of black limestone rock which stands 6 metres high, and extends for 30 metres. It is known in the area as "Nigger Rock", the place where Col. Luke's slaves buried 30 of their dead.

In the fall of 1996, rumours began to spread that farmer Benoit had scooped land from the foot of Nigger Rock to shore up a barn, and that he had found human remains. Avery asked Iris Gurthrie, a 94-year-old neighbour of his, to tell him more about the Rock. Guthrie told him that she had played on it as a child, that there was an open lane leading to it, and that at the bottom of it there was a mound with a metal sign next to it reading "Negro cemetery". Around 1950, farmer Benoit shut off access to the lane, removed the sign, and leveled the mound while building a road to a stand of prime lumber at the back of his property.

Avery was shocked. He began looking into whether the Benois had broken any law forbidding the desecration of graves, and started researching the fate of other burial places in Canada. He found out that there were only two marked ones left: one in Birchtown, Nova Scotia, and the other in Priceville, Ontario. He felt an obligation, as the descendant of slaves himself, to do whatever he could to "find peace for the souls of these departed brothers and sisters."

He arranged a meeting between farmer Benoit and Dan Philip, President of the Black Coalition of Quebec. Philip asked Benoit to make the Rock accessible to the public again. Benoit refused, claiming that the Rock got its name from its black colour, not from any black people having been buried there. So Avery started a serious search for the missing "Negro cemetery" sign that Iris Gurthrie had told him about, found it in the ruins of a stone barn near Dunham, and decided to go over Benoit's head to the town council.

That's when the storm broke. Benoit's allies expressed such hostility that it left Avery wondering whether it would ever be safe for him to travel down the back roads of the area again.

He decided to go to the press. As a result of articles in the Montreal papers, and reports on local television stations, offers of help came in from people like lawyer David Scholtz, ombudsman Dawn Ducette, investment counselor John Leblanc, computer programmer Francis Scarder, radio broadcaster Edgar Gay, human rights activist Fo Memi, and Edina Bayne, President of Black History Month.

They are trying (1) to persuade the Quebec government to designate the rock as a historical site, and to change its name to Slave Rock, and (2) to persuade the town of Saint-Armand to take on the responsibility of re-installing the missing sign, putting a fence around the area, and restoring an access lane for the public.

Here is an opportunity to build a film around a lively story that would cast light on a dark part of Canada's past. The film would focus on Avery and his supporters waging their campaign to "bring peace to the souls" who were buried at Slave Rock.

Hank Avery is a very attractive central character. He is a much-respected primary school teacher, an amateur actor and pop-singer with a lovely voice, and an articulate and passionate story teller, in his own gentle way.

His struggle with the town council of St. Armand would be set within the framework of the history of slavery in Canada, illustrated with archival graphics, and narrated by Avery himself.

I would need one month for research and scripting, assisted by Noel Thomas. He is a personal friend, and a community radio broadcaster who has good connections with the black community of Montreal.

Martin Duckworth  
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